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Duncan Lags in Early Race for Funds

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Shortly after Montgomery voters returned County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) for a third term by an overwhelming margin last November, he quietly began setting his sights on a run for governor in 2006.

Within three months, he hired a political director and a pollster and started planning his first fundraiser, which was to be organized by union leaders and held at Dalesio's of Little Italy, a favorite of Baltimore politicians. The dinner was set for this past Monday.

It never happened. Duncan's camp would not say precisely why the event was canceled, but the difficulty in kick-starting his fundraising effort could be a sign of the obstacles he will face in a drive for the governor's mansion. While Duncan has yet to start raising money for 2006, his two most likely opponents are vacuuming up huge sums from a limited supply of political dollars.

At 5:30 tonight, Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley (D) will start welcoming \$4,000 donors to an event at Ravens Stadium that he hopes will raise roughly \$1 million for both his upcoming mayor's race and for future campaigns. Later this month, Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) will use the drawing power of former New York mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani for the first of two large-scale events where he will charge guests as much as \$4,000 to attend.

"These two guys have just completely accelerated the process," said Montgomery County Council member Steven A. Silverman (D-At Large), a close Duncan ally. "It front-loads the fundraising effort. It's no longer a four-year cycle. Now it's more like a one-year cycle, with everyone getting out there as fast as possible, trying to raise as much as possible."

Part of what's driving the fast start to the 2006 campaign, Silverman said, is Maryland's tight limit on political giving. During the next three years, a donor to Maryland candidates can contribute no more than \$10,000 altogether.

That means those paying top dollar to attend the O'Malley and Ehrlich events this month will have already used up 80 percent of their contributions for all state races.

Richard E. Hug, Ehrlich's fundraising chief, said the dynamics of Maryland's campaign finance limits have "put a premium" on early money. That's especially true, he said, given that Ehrlich plans to exceed by a substantial amount the \$11 million he spent on the 2002 election.

Another reason for the early start, said University of Maryland professor Paul Herrnson, is the widely held belief that the 2006 race is going to be highly competitive. Though Ehrlich overcame Maryland's 2-1 Democratic advantage last time, he can expect a major challenge three years from now, Herrnson said. And any Democrat will have to worry about financing a potentially hard-fought primary campaign and surviving with enough money for an equally brutal general election.

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But Duncan's political advisers said they don't believe the limited supply of cash will ultimately be a problem, should he commit to the race.

Anita Dunn, a Duncan media consultant, said it is far too early for Duncan to be worrying about what Ehrlich and O'Malley are up to. O'Malley, she noted, will need some of his campaign account to finance a mayoral reelection bid this year. And she took Ehrlich's early fundraising efforts as a sign that the governor expects a daunting fight.

"I don't think anybody who has watched Doug Duncan's career believes he will not be able to be competitive, financially or otherwise, for whatever office he chooses to run for," Dunn said.

Del. Peter Franchot (D-Montgomery) agreed that it's too early to be concerned about money. He said that Maryland has a surprisingly large pool of givers and that Duncan should have no trouble raising enough to run a strong campaign.

"It's not like Utah or North Dakota," Franchot said. "There are a lot of potential contributors, and a lot of them live in Montgomery County. I don't think it's an impediment for Duncan that O'Malley and Ehrlich are tapping out some of the major donors early. There will still be money for Duncan."

In part, that's because there are plenty of legal ways to get around the \$10,000 limit.

"You have to realize," Hug said, "these [donors] have spouses who can give, they can make corporate contributions, they can make a [political action committee] contribution. There are other avenues."

Whether the fast start by Ehrlich and O'Malley poses a threat to Duncan's ambitions, many see the early fundraising flurry as part of a distressing trend.

Montgomery council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg), a former Common Cause director who lobbied unsuccessfully for campaign finance reform this year, said massive fundraisers such as the one O'Malley is throwing tonight are suffocating efforts by others to run grass-roots campaigns that engage everyday citizens.

"The political arms race is out of control," Andrews said yesterday. "Every year, it just gets that much harder to compete unless you are bankrolled by big givers."

In something of a role reversal for Duncan, who used a bulging campaign account to wield power in Montgomery elections last year, he appears to be relying on less costly means of getting his message out as he prepares for a statewide run. At least for now.

Last month, he began barnstorming the state to expand his contacts and connections with Democrats. He was the featured speaker at Democratic dinners in Frederick and Baltimore counties in April. Tonight, he plans to address party members at a dinner in Washington County. On Friday, he will speak to loyalists in Charles County, and on Saturday, he is scheduled to be the guest speaker at a function in St. Mary's County.

All the events are free.

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